

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

January 29th, 2024

Chairman Cooper, Vice Chair Davie, and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the pressing religious freedom conditions in Myanmar. I am Michelle Lee, MPH, and my research focuses largely on documenting state-sponsored attacks on the Rohingya community.

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis and Conflict in Rakhine State

The crisis engulfing the Rohingyas, a predominantly Muslim group in Myanmar, is an urgent call to action for the global community. In 2017, the brutal campaigns led by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya triggered a massive humanitarian crisis, resulting in a vast exodus to Bangladesh's refugee camps, which have become the largest in the world.¹

The United Nations has called this crisis a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.² As of January 2024, more than 960,000 Rohingya population is in need of urgent assistance.³ They face severe shortages in basic needs: over 70% lack safe water and sanitation, and barely 2% of Rohingya women give birth in hospitals.⁴

Despite their generational presence in Myanmar, the Rohingya are denied citizenship through systematic exclusion. The government banned the term “Rohingya” and views them as illegal immigrants and a national security threat.

The Military’s Exploitation of Social Media

The presumed goal behind the military group, Tatmadaw, is to help the military preserve power and rally nationalistic support by inflaming ethno-religious strife.⁵ The Tatmadaw has weaponized social media in their campaigns, transforming these platforms into battlefields. In 2018, Facebook uncovered concrete evidence of such misuse and the UN Human Rights Council has also identified these online

¹ World Food Programme USA. (2020). Rohingya crisis: a firsthand look into the world's largest refugee camp.

² OHCHR. (2018). Myanmar: UN expert calls for accountability over violence in Rakhine State.

³ UNICEF. (2024). Rohingya crisis. <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/rohingya-crisis>

⁴ Khin T (2017) Rohingya: a preventable genocide allowed to happen. *Insight Turkey* 19(4):43–53. <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2017194.03>

⁵ Harvard International Review (2018). Why Myanmar’s Military Targets the Rohingya: The Politics of Slaughter. <https://hir.harvard.edu/why-myanmar-targets-rohingya/>

operations as systematic and orchestrated attacks against the Rohingyas.^{6 7} The Tatmadaw's online operations are a calculated psychological warfare aimed at instilling pervasive fear among civilians, while garnering support for military actions.

In 2017, Tatmadaw spread fake news on Facebook to both Rohingya and Buddhist groups that an attack from the other side was imminent. These fear-mongering tactics forced them to vigilantly observe and distrust each other, deepening the divide between them. The consequences were devastating: In 2018, nearly 700,000 Rohingyas were forced to flee to Bangladesh in terror.

High-Tech Surveillance and Ongoing Repression

Rohingyas are required to register for a digitalized National Verification Card that identifies them as foreigners, a tactic similar to the digital surveillance methods used against the Uyghur community in Xinjiang, China.⁸ Additionally, the Tatmadaw also uses drones and phone-cracking devices to monitor the Rohingyas. These tools, allowing for illicit real-time tracking and eavesdropping,⁹ mirror Chinese techniques like biometric scanning, phone tracking apps, surveillance cameras, all contributing to what many describe as an "open-air prison."¹⁰

The Regional Impact of CCP's Involvement

CCP's great economic interest in Myanmar, particularly as a gateway to the Indian Ocean and strategic trade routes, has emboldened the Myanmar military.¹¹ The atrocities in Xinjiang and Rakhine State reveal a disturbing pattern: a shared strategy by the CCP to systematically target Muslim minorities, employing trial-and-error surveillance tactics. The plight of the Rohingya is not just Myanmar's issue; it's a vivid example of regional power dynamics with global implications. The systematic repression seen in both regions, fueled by advanced digital surveillance technology, is indicative of a broader shift towards techno-authoritarianism, with significant transnational influences.

⁶ OHCHR (2018). Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar.

⁷ New York Times (2018). A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military.

⁸ Fortify Rights. (2017). They tried to kill us all: atrocity crimes against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar.

⁹ New York Times (2021). Myanmar's Military Deploys Digital Arsenal of Repression in Crackdown.

¹⁰ James Leibold. (2020). Surveillance in China's Xinjiang Region: Ethnic Sorting, Coercion, and Inducement, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29:121, 46-60, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2019.1621529

¹¹ United States Institute of Peace (2018). China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts.

Recommendations

Despite heightened international aid and attention, the Myanmar military accelerated its state-sponsored ethnic cleansing operations against the Rohingyas, showing little response to international pressure. In light of these developments, I propose the following recommendations to the U.S. government:

1. **Dialogue with CCP:** The U.S. should actively pursue open dialogue with CCP to join broader international aid efforts addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis. This approach could apply pressure on the Myanmar military to move towards peaceful resolution and reform.¹²

2. **Document Surveillance Tactics and Human Rights Violations:** Due to the challenge of accessing restricted regions like China and Myanmar, it is crucial to thoroughly document human rights violations using advanced technology, including satellite imagery, photographs, videos, and social media. However, this strategy carries risks for reporters and informants and must be approached with caution.

3. **Support for Rohingya Refugees:** We must advocate for the fundamental rights for the Rohingya, including citizenship, freedom of movement, and access to livelihoods, alongside a wider plan for humanitarian aid in Rakhine State.¹³

And in closing, I want to thank the committee for your commitment to these vital issues. Crimes against humanity cannot be treated merely as an area of disengagement or disagreement. Genocide, by its very definition, is an international crime. It demands active global engagement and resolution.

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¹² *ibid*

¹³ Kofi Annan Foundation (2017). Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.